

Angels in Rabbinic Literature

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Rabbinic literature comprises a vast body of different texts spanning from the Mishna, the Tosefta and the two Talmudim, i.e. the Babylonian and the Palestinian or Jerusalem Talmud, to the enormous library of various Midrashim.¹ This literature could be divided into halakhic and aggadic topics. The period of emergence of these texts covers almost the first millenium after the destruction of the Second Temple. But, neither Gaonic writings nor later Midrashim of medieval times are included in the following survey. To sharpen the focus of this article I would like to stress the point that rabbinic literature is the literature of the rabbis and not of all Jews. To put it in a more positive way: There are Jewish texts from this period that do not belong to rabbinic literature. Some of these Jewish non-rabbinic texts, like for example the Heikhalot literature² or Jewish amulets and magic bowls³, could indeed enrich very much our knowledge of Jewish angelology of this time.⁴ However, in rabbinic literature angels are not always a topic. In the Mishna there is no mentioning of angels at all. Other tannaitic sources rarely mention angels with personal names. In contrast, the Babylonian Talmud as well as the classical Midrashim offer a wealth of scattered information about angels.

The following pages concentrate on an overview of angels in rabbinic literature. This survey owes very much the research of several scholars. Of the older scholarly contributions to this subject nothing but the works of Maurice Schwab⁵, Ruben Margalioth⁶ and Ephraim E.

1 Cf. Stemberger, Einleitung.

2 Cf. Schäfer, Synopse; Schäfer, Geniza-Fragmente.

3 Cf. Naveh / Shaked, Amulets; Naveh / Shaked, Magic Spells.

4 Cf. Schäfer, God; Lesses, Practices.

5 Schwab, Vocabulaire. Schwab's etymologies of angelic names and his methodology have been criticized, cf. the reviews by L. Blau, in: *Zeitschrift für Hebräische Bibliographie* 2, 1897, 82-85; 118-120; and W. Bacher, in: *MGWJ* 42 N.F. 6, 1898, 525-528; 570-572.

6 Margalioth, *Mal'akhe 'elyon*, comprises in Hebrew an alphabetical listing of angelic names together with their sources in the rabbinic literature, the Zohar and some later midrashic collections.

Urbach⁷ could still be recommended. Peter Schäfer's study *Rivalität zwischen Engeln und Menschen*, published in 1975, is still the best and comprehensive analysis of the relevant texts.⁸ More recent research is dedicated to either specific angels or angelological aspects.⁹

Since biblical times angelological traditions increased rapidly in ancient Judaism.¹⁰ On the one hand there is a continuity of these traditions and on the other hand there are new developments. In general, there is no uniform and consistent angelology in these sources. All we could find is a variety of concepts. It is a well-known fact that belief in angels was widespread among both rabbis and laymen.

Two conflicting exegetical strategies concerning angels in the Bible could be observed in rabbinic literature: First, the introduction of angels in order to avoid anthropomorphic interpretations of God. Second, the elimination of angels in order to protect monotheistic concepts.¹¹ For the rabbis the biblical notion of an angel very often refers to God or his Shekhina, as expressed in this hermeneutical dictum: "Wherever the angel appears the Shekhina appears."¹²

Since biblical times images of royal courts are paralleled to God's court of angels. But in contrast to these classical images the rabbis stressed the active participation of angels in the decisions and rulings of God. Only in rabbinic literature stemming from the 3rd century onwards angels are called "upper familia" or "heavenly court of justice".¹³

Generally, angels were regarded as being superior to man. But there are various aggadic statements differing from this idea. There is the opinion, e.g., that the righteous are superior to the ministering angels or at least regarded as equal. In the Tosefta we find the following statement: "At the end of days the righteous will rank above the angels and the angels will learn the mysteries of heaven from the righteous."¹⁴ Just another objection says that only Israelites are capable of becoming equal to the angels or that this is possible only after death.

7 Urbach, *Sages*, especially chapter VIII: The Celestial Retinue, 135-183. See also Marmorstein, *Angels*.

8 Schäfer, *Rivalität*.

9 Part of these contributions is mentioned in the following.

10 Cf. Olyan, *Thousands*; Mach, *Entwicklungsstadien*.

11 Cf. Schäfer, *Rivalität* 43, 48-51; Urbach, *Sages* 135-137.

12 ShemR 32:9; cf. BerR 97:3.

13 Cf. BerR 52:2; DevR 11:10; see Schäfer, *Rivalität* 41; Urbach, *Sages* 177f.

14 tShab 6:1; cf. yShab 6:10, 8d; ShemR 20:10; WaR 27:2; DevR 1:12; ShirR 7:9,1.

Origin of angels

According to different sources angels are created either on the second or the fifth day of creation:

"When were the angels created? Rabbi Johanan said: On the second day of creation were they created. (...) Rabbi Hanina said: They were created on the fifth day of creation. (...) Rabbi Luliani ben Rabbi Tabari (said) in the name of Rabbi Isaac: Both from the viewpoint of Rabbi Hanina and from that of Rabbi Johanan, there is agreement that nothing at all was created on the first day."¹⁵

In contrast to this, another concept speaks of a continuous creation of angels:

"Rabbi Samuel bar Nahman said in the name of Rabbi Jonathan: An angelic chorus above does not repeat praises. Rabbi Helbo said: Every day the Holy One, blessed be He, creates a new angelic chorus, they say a new song, and go their way."¹⁶

By the end of that day these angels sink in the river of fire. In the continuation of this text the two archangels Michael and Gabriel are explicitly excluded from this concept of *creatio continua*:

"(Jacob was wrestling with) Michael or Gabriel, who are princes above. All of the other angels change every day, but they do not."¹⁷

A new group of angels is created every day. Their purpose is to praise God. There are only two angels, Michael and Gabriel, which permanently serve God.

Angelic characteristics

The following summarizes some basic characteristics of angels according to the rabbis scattered throughout their literature. Angels are the most perfect creation of God. Different from human beings they do not have a fugitive body of flesh and blood but consist of fire.¹⁸ According to another tradition angels are made half of fire and half of water.¹⁹

15 BerR 1:1 (transl. Neusner, J., Genesis Rabbah. The Judaic Commentary to the Book of Genesis. A New American Translation, I-III, Atlanta 1985).

16 BerR 78:1; transl. Neusner.

17 BerR 78:1; cf. bHag 14a; Sifra 1:1.

18 BerR 78:1; ShemR 15:6; BemR 21:16; DevR 11:4; ShirR 3:11 §1; PesK, p. 5; PesR, pp. 80a, 155b; PRE 22; bHag 14a.

19 yRHSh 2:4, 58a; PesK p. 5f.; DevR 5:12; ShirR 3:11 §1; MHG Wa p. 180.

Angels could live eternal.²⁰ They are free of evil inclination as it is written in the following Midrash: "That indicates that the impulse to do evil has no control over angels."²¹ Therefore they could not sin. Angels speak Hebrew, the Holy Language, but not Aramaic.²² They have understanding and they are able to foretell the future.²³ God consulted the angels before the creation of man.²⁴

"Never the Holy One, blessed be He, does anything in the world before he consults the heavenly court of justice. What is the proof? *True is the word and great the army* (Dan 10:1). When is the seal of the Holy One, blessed be He, true? When he consulted the heavenly court of justice."²⁵

Angels cannot carry out more than one mission at a time.²⁶ They are not allowed to take a step without the command of God.²⁷ They could make errors.²⁸ They have no needs.²⁹ They are incapable of viewing the glory of God. They do not know their own dwelling place.³⁰ Their size is equal to a third of the world.³¹ Angels walk upright. Because they do not have knees, they cannot sit. Angels are able to fly in the air. They move from one end of the world to another. They assume the shape of men or animals.³² They enjoy the splendor of the Shekhina.

In the verses of Ps 78:23-25 the wondrous celestial food *manna* that had fed the people of Israel during their forty years in the wilderness is called the *bread of the angels*.³³ The question of what angels actually do eat³⁴ is asked in the following text of the Babylonian Talmud:

"Our rabbis taught: *Man did eat the bread of the mighty* (Ps 78:25), i.e., bread which ministering angels eat. This was the interpretation of Rabbi Akiba. When these words were reported to Rabbi Ishmael, he said to them: Go forth and tell Akiba: Akiba, you have erred. For do indeed the ministering

20 BerR 8:11, 14:3, 53:2; BemR 14:22, 16:24; bHag 16a; ARN version A 37, p. 109; version B 43, p. 120; PesR p. 179b; MHG Ber introd. p. 31.

21 BerR 48:11 (transl. Neusner).

22 bSot 33a; bShab 12b.

23 bHag 16a.

24 WaR 29:1; ARN version B, 1 and 41; MHG Ber p. 58; PesK p. 334; PesR p. 187b; BerR 8:5; bSan 38a.

25 ySan 1:1, 18a; cf. bSan 38b; MHG Ber p. 55; cf. Schäfer, Rivalität 42.

26 bBM 86b; BerR 50:2.

27 TanB Shem 115.

28 QohR 6:10.

29 bYom 4b; MTeh 78:25.

30 YalSh Dev 825; MekhSh to 15:2.

31 PesR 83:12; BerR 68:12.

32 TJon, Gen 32:25, 37:15; QohR 1:1, ShirR 1:1, §4; 7:3, §8; DevR 2:20; ShemR 1:36.

33 Cf. the translation of Ps 78:25 in LXX.

34 Cf. Goodman, Angels.

angels eat bread? Was it not said long ago: *I did neither eat bread nor drank water* (Deut 9:18)?”³⁵

The view of Rabbi Ishmael is commonly accepted in rabbinic literature.³⁶ A more general idea is that there is no eating and drinking in heaven at all.³⁷

“Rabbi Isaac says: It is written: *My sacrificial offerings, my food* (Num 28:2). But is there any eating or drinking for Me? If you say that there is any eating or drinking for Me, learn from My angels, learn from My ministers, as it is written: *His ministers are burning fire* (Ps 104:4). From whence are they nourished? Rabbi Judah in the name of Rabbi Isaac says: From the splendor of the Shekhina, as it is written: *In the light of a king's face there is life* (Prov 16:15).”³⁸

Numbers and Classifications

Despite the general assumption that the number of angels is countless³⁹ various numbers are suggested by the rabbis.

“The chariots of God, twice then thousand, thousands upon thousand, the Lord among them, Sinai in holiness (Ps 68:18). Rabbi Johanan said: On the day that the Holy One, blessed be He, appeared on Mt. Sinai to give the Tora to Israel, 600,000 ministering angels descended with Him, and in the hand of each one was a crown with which to crown each Israelite.”⁴⁰

Another source counts twenty-two thousand ministering angels.⁴¹ The frequently mentioned number of seventy angels corresponds to the seventy tongues and seventy nations.

In order to manage thousands of angels the rabbis could fall back on various classifying systems. Already in the Hebrew Bible the Sera-phim, the Cherubim and Hayyot (“beasts”) are mentioned as classes of angels.⁴² They are also well-known in rabbinic literature.⁴³ Since biblical times, more angelic brigade names were derived from the visions of Ezekiel ch. 1 and 10 and some of them are also attested in rabbinic litera-

35 bYom 75b (transl. Epstein).

36 Cf. BerR 8:11.

37 Cf. ApcAbr 13.

38 PesR 16:2; PesK 6:1; Tan Pinhas 12; BemR 21:16; cf. PesR 48:3; ARN version A 1, p. 3a; BerR 2:2; Chernus, *Mysticism* 74-87.

39 Cf. Dan 7:10.

40 PesR 21:7; cf. MTeh 103:8; TanB Tezaveh 7; PesK 16:3; ShemR 51:8; in PesR 33:10, this number is doubled to 1,200,000 ministering angels.

41 PesK 12 (Mandelbaum 219).

42 Cf. Gen 3:24; Isa 6:2-6; Ezek 1:5-15 and 10:1-22; Ps 18:11; Sam 22:11.

43 Cf. SifDev 206 (Finkelstein 337); SifBam 103 (Horovitz 101); PesR 7:2; 20:4; bHag 13a.

ture: The Ophannim ("wheels"),⁴⁴ the Galgallim ("wheels"),⁴⁵ the Maasim ("creatures"), the Hashmallim ("bronzes"; "electrum"),⁴⁶ and the Tarshishim ("chrysolites").⁴⁷ Biblical words of obscure meaning and/or rare reference as well became classes of angels of their own. Of these angelic divisions the Shinanim,⁴⁸ Erellim,⁴⁹ Taphsarim,⁵⁰ and Degalim⁵¹ are mentioned in rabbinic as well as in the Hekhalot literature.

Furthermore, there are higher and lower classes of angels. Very often, the angelic hierarchy corresponds to the cosmological system of three or seven heavens.⁵² The highest angels are always situated in the highest heaven in close vicinity of God. Just around the throne of God there are the ministering angels. Moreover, angels are classified according to countries.⁵³ Or, they are arranged according to their moral-ethical qualities. Hence angels of peace dwell near God, but wicked angels are remote from him.⁵⁴ A special class of angels are the angels of destruction.⁵⁵ They belong to the party of demons.⁵⁶ The graphic resemblance of the Hebrew words *šar* ("prince") and *šed* ("demon") corresponds with the transition from angels to demons.⁵⁷ According to an anonymous statement the work of the magician is done with the help of the angels of destruction.⁵⁸

44 MekhY Yitro 2:6, 2:10 (Horovitz 225, 239); PesR 20:4; bHul 91b-92a; bHag 12b, 13b; bAZ 43b; bRHSh 24b.

45 Cf. PesR 20:4.

46 Cf. MekhY Yitro 2:6.

47 Concerning the exegetical origins of these angelic brigades see Olyan, *Thousands* 32-50.

48 Cf. Hen(hebr) §10 (Synopsis); see Olyan, *Thousands* 50-51.

49 Cf. bKet 104a; yKet 12:3, 35a; yKil 9:4, 32b; QohR to 9:10; Hen(hebr) §§17, 57 (Synopsis); see Olyan, *Thousands* 52-53.

50 Cf. Hen(hebr) §§17, 57 (Synopsis); SRdB §§785, 805 (Synopsis); see Olyan, *Thousands* 53-55.

51 Cf. ShirR 2:4; 5:10; SRdB §773 (Synopsis); see Olyan, *Thousands* 55-58.

52 Cf. Schäfer, *Cosmology*.

53 TanB Ber 178.

54 TanB Wa 39.

55 Cf. QohR 4:1, §3; PesR p. 96b-97a; MTeh 7:6; PRE 45; ShemR 44:8.

56 Concerning rabbinic demonology see Stemberger, *Rolle*; Becker, *Wunder* 141-183.

57 Cf. Dan, *Princes*.

58 Cf. ShemR 9:11.

Purposes and functions

The first and foremost duty of angels is the heavenly liturgy. They sing hymns of praise to God.⁵⁹ But, as intermediaries between God and man they are also responsible for the transmitting of human prayers:

"Rabbi Pinhas in the name of Rabbi Meir and Rabbi Jeremiah in the name of Rabbi Hiyya ben Abba said: When Israel prays, you do not find them all praying at the same time, but each assembly prays separately, first one and then another. When they have all finished, the angel appointed over prayers collects all the prayers that have been offered in all the Synagogues, weaves them into garlands and places them upon the head of God."⁶⁰

Furthermore, there is a variety of different purposes of angels. Several angels are responsible for certain aspects of nature. It seems, that older mythological concepts were transformed into an angelological system. There is, e.g., a prince of darkness.⁶¹ Another prince is in charge of the sea.⁶² The name of the prince of hail is Yurqemi.⁶³ Gabriel is called the prince of fire and Michael the prince of snow.⁶⁴ The angel Ridya rules over the rain.⁶⁵ The angel Duma⁶⁶ reigns over the underworld of the deceased souls.⁶⁷ The angel Layla ("night") is assigned to pregnancy; and in the Babylonian Talmud we could read about him:

"Rabbi Hanina ben Papa interprets: This angel, who is placed over pregnancy, his name is Layla. He takes a drop (of semen), puts it before the Holy One, blessed be He, and says before him: Lord of the world, what shall this drop become: a strong or a weak, a wise or a stupid, a rich or a poor person? But he does not ask: A sinner or a righteous? Did not Rabbi Hanina say this, because Rabbi Hanina said: All is in the hands of heaven except the fear of God."⁶⁸

Angels accompany men on their daily actions. They protect man from dangers or guide him through difficult situations. The best friends of

59 TanB Shem 115; SifDev 306.

60 ShemR 21:4; transl. Freedman / Simon, *Midrash Rabbah*.

61 PesR 95a; in PesR 203a the prince of darkness is identified with Satan.

62 bBB 74b; bPes 118b; bAr 15a; ShemR 24:1; bGit 68b; BerR 10:7; ySan 7:19, 25d; in BemR 18:22 and in bBB 74b the prince of the sea is identified with the mythological monster Rahab; cf. ShemR 15:22; 24:2.

63 bPes 118a; MTeh 117:3.

64 bPes 118a; MTeh 117:3; ShirR 3:11 §1. This goes back to the common concept that Gabriel is made of fire and Michael is made of snow; cf. BemR 12:8; DevR 5:12.

65 bTaan 25b; bYom 20b; cf. DevR 7:6.

66 The name goes back to Ps 94:17.

67 Cf. PesR 120a; bBer 18b; bHag 5a-b; bShab 152b; bSan 94a; see Olyan, *Thousands* 74-76.

68 bNid 16b; cf. MHG Wa p. 261; PesK p. 181; ShirR 4:12 §1.

men in heaven are angels. They help man when he is in trouble.⁶⁹ The idea of an accompanying angel goes back to the verse: *For he shall give his angels charge over you, to keep you in all your ways* (Ps 91:11).

"Rabbi Eleazar ben Rabbi Jose the Galilean says: If you see a righteous man go on a journey and you plan to go on that same journey, push up your trip for three days or postpone it for three days on his account, so that you may go on the journey with him. On what account? Because angels of peace accompany him, since it is said: *For he will give his angels charge of you to guard you in all your ways* (Ps 91:11). And if you see an evil man go on a journey and you plan to go on that same journey, push up your trip for three days or postpone it for three days on his account, so that you do not go on the journey with him. On what account? Because adversary angels accompany him, since it is said: *Appoint a wicked man against him, let an accuser bring him to trial* (Ps 109:6)."⁷⁰

Another text stresses the importance of a single angel as intercessor pleading for man before God at the heavenly court:

"Rabbi Eliezer, son of Rabbi Jose the Galilean, said: Even if 999 angels argue against (a man), and (only) a single angel argues in his favor, the Holy One blessed be He inclines the scales in his favor."⁷¹

There are angels of life and angels of death,⁷² both keeping a register of men's life and behaviour. At the end of days they will evaluate it as is written in the following passage:

"For whoever does not store up a treasury of merit attained through performance of religious duties and good deeds, lo, there is the angel of death."⁷³

A special role is played by the various guardian angels responsible for the nations, the earth, individual kings or even ordinary people. Angels of the nations are regarded as hostile to Israel and have to be put in chains in order to prevent them harm to Israel.⁷⁴ When nations fall, the guardian angels fall with them. The same is true regarding punishment.⁷⁵

Guardian angels of the following nations are mentioned throughout rabbinic literature: Israel ("Michael"),⁷⁶ Egypt and Nebuchadnezzar ("Kal"),⁷⁷ the Persians ("Dubiel"),⁷⁸ and Edom.⁷⁹

69 bShab 53b.

70 tShab 17:2f. (transl. Neusner, *The Tosefta*, New York 1981).

71 yQid 1:10, 61d.

72 Cf. TanB Wa'era 9; ShemR 32:1; 51:8; BemR 16:24; PRE 47.

73 BerR 9:10 (transl. Neusner).

74 Cf. ShemR 42:1.

75 MekhSh 15:1; DevR 1:22.

76 Cf. Dan 10:13,21; 12:1; PRE 4; PesR p. 185a.

77 Cf. ShemR 21:5; MShem 18, p. 98; ShirR 8; DevR 1:22.

Special protection is given for the people of Israel and the city of Jerusalem, as is expressed in the following passage:

*"For I will be to her a wall of fire round about, says the Lord, and I will be the glory within her (Zech 2:9). This is what the Holy One, blessed be He, said: I and all of My family will become a wall for Jerusalem in the future, and I will command the angels to guard her."*⁸⁰

The prince of the world is assigned over the whole creation. The few instances in rabbinic literature mentioning this prince even seem to replace God in order to avoid anthropomorphic images.⁸¹

Angels with proper names

An alphabetical lexicon of proper names of angels mentioned in the rabbinic literature would include inter alia: Akhtariel, Akhzariel, Asael, Asarya, Duma, Gabriel, Gallitsur, Hadarniel, Hananya, Layla, Metatron, Michael, Mishael, Naqid, Peli, Qemuel, Raphael, Ridya, Samael, Sandalphon, Satan, Semalyon, Shemhasai, Siggaron, Suriel, Uriel, Yurqemi, and Zagzagel.⁸² Many more proper names of angels could be found in the Jewish mystical and magical traditions of the same period.⁸³

Mostly, the proper names of angels in rabbinic literature are constructed of a noun, very often etymologically hinting to a certain purpose, and the Hebrew theophoric ending *-el* meaning "God".⁸⁴ According to the rabbis the naming of angels goes back to the Babylonian Exile:

*"Rabbi Simeon ben Laqish said: Also the names of the angels were brought along with (the exiles) from Babylonia. In the beginning (it was written): Then one of the seraphim flew unto me (Isa 6:6), (and) The seraphim stood above (God) (Isa 6:2). From then and later on (one called their names as follows): And the man Gabriel (Dan 9:21), (and) Except Michael your prince (Dan 10:21)."*⁸⁵

78 Cf. Dan 10:13; bYom 77a.

79 Cf. bMak 12a.

80 PesR 35:2; cf. Chernus, *Mysticism* 108-125.

81 Cf. bHul 60a; ShemR 17:4; MTeh 104:24; bYev 16b.

82 For references see Margalioth, *Mal'akhe 'elyon*.

83 See Grözinger, *Namen*; Elior, *Mysticism*.

84 The typical Greek ending *-on* could be found in names like Sandalphon.

85 yRHSh 1:2, 56d; cf. BerR 18:2: "Rabbi Simeon ben Laqish said: Even the names of the (arch)angels Michael, Gabriel and Raphael (were brought along with the exiles from Babylonia)." See Urbach, *Sages* 166 n. 22; Schäfer, *Rivalität* 56 n. 98; Hengel, *Judentum* 424 n. 726.

Normally, the four archangels in rabbinic literature are Gabriel, Michael, Raphael, and Uriel. The oldest extant list is found in *En (aeth)* 9:1 and mentions Gabriel, Michael, Raphael and Sariel. The first three angels are constant in post-biblical Jewish literature, only the fourth is varying.⁸⁶ But it seems, that the idea of four archangels in rabbinic literature is not as important as before in the deuterocanonical and apocryphal literature or as later in the classical Kabbalah. The archangels' participation in the creation of man and in the giving of the law are the main features in rabbinic literature. Only in late Midrashim Michael became the Guardian Angel of Israel.⁸⁷ It is true that the pair of Gabriel and Michael is still very prominent in rabbinic literature, but nevertheless, the whole quartet of four archangels could rarely be found. One of these rare texts assigns these angels to directions and Israelite tribes:

"Four angels surround the throne of the Holy One, blessed be He: Michael on his right opposite to Ruben (...), Uriel on his left opposite to Dan who is in the north (...), Gabriel before him opposite to the kingdom of Juda, Moses and Aaron who are in the east (...), and Raphael opposite to Ephraim (...) who is in the west."⁸⁸

According to a widely accepted etymology of his name Raphael's healing activity⁸⁹ is mentioned in the Babylonian Talmud: "Raphael came to heal Abraham."⁹⁰ About the latter another talmudic statement reads: "Three ministering angels came to Abraham: Michael in the middle, Gabriel on the right and Raphael on the left."⁹¹ Because of his healing forces Raphael is well attested in several magical texts.⁹²

One of the most illustrious angels from rabbinic times onwards is Metatron.⁹³ He is called the prince of the divine face. About the mystical origin of his name it is said: "His name is the same as his Master's."⁹⁴ Therefore scholars identified him with the gnostic angel Yahoel.⁹⁵ Because of his intimacy to God he is called in the *Heikhalot*

86 Cf. 1QM 9:14-16; *Hen(aeth)* 40:9; 54:6; 71:8; *VitAd* 40:3; *BemR* 2:10; *PesR* 46; *PRE* 4.

87 *AgBer* 32, p. 64; cf. *ShemR* 1:5: "Rabbi Johanan said: This is Michael. Rabbi Hanina said: This is Gabriel."; cf. *ShemR* 18:5; Urbach, *Sages* 141-142.

88 *BemR* 2:10; cf. *BemR* 2:6.

89 The root *RP'* means „to heal“; so, Raphael means „God healed“; cf. Mach, Raphael.

90 *bBM* 86a; cf. *BemR* 2:10.

91 *bYom* 37a.

92 Cf. *Naveh / Shaked*, Amulets, amulet 3:9; amulet 7:2; *Naveh / Shaked*, Spells, amulet 18:4.

93 See Scholem, *Trends*, 68, 366, n. 107; Scholem, *Gnosticism* 41; Scholem, *Metatron*; Lieberman, *Shkiin* 15; Urbach, *Sages* 743, n. 15.

94 *bSan* 38b.

95 The name Yahoel contains the abbreviation of the tetragramm YHWH.

literature “lesser YHWH”.⁹⁶ Coincidentally, the name of Metatron has the same Gematria like God’s epithet Shadday, namely 314. Of paramount importance is the story of Enoch’s transformation into the angel Metatron.⁹⁷

In rabbinic literature above all two wicked angels are prominent and later on they are even interchangeable: Satan⁹⁸ and Samael⁹⁹. While Satan is missing almost completely in early, tannaitic sources,¹⁰⁰ his most important function in later Palestinian texts is to be the adversary accusing Israel or, more generally, human beings of transgressions of the law. Mostly, the angel Michael is facing Satan defending mankind and emphasizing their merits.¹⁰¹ Corresponding to the gematrical sum of the determined name *ha-satan* he is able to accuse Israel only on 364 days of the year, except the Day of Atonement, when he has no power to do so.¹⁰² In the Babylonian Talmud the role of Satan is intertwined with Samael, the angel of death and evil inclination.¹⁰³ Since then there is no theological need for the Satan because the function of the accuser could be done by others and the seduction of man could be interpreted as caused by evil inclination. So, in the following text Samael plays the role of the accuser of Israel:

“Rabbi Jose said: To what can Michael and Samael be compared? To a defending counsel and prosecutor standing in court. The one speaks and the other speaks. When the one finished speaking and the other finished speaking, the counsel for the defence knew that he had won the case. Thereupon he began to praise the judge, (asking him) to announce the verdict. Now the prosecutor wished to add a word, but the defending counsel said to him: Hold thy peace and let us hear (the verdict) of the judge. So, Michael and Samael stood before the Shekhina, and the Satan was accusing and Michael was defending Israel. Then the Satan came to speak (again), and Michael silenced him.”¹⁰⁴

Samael tempts Abraham and Isaac.¹⁰⁵ His opposite in the heavenly court is either Gabriel¹⁰⁶ or Michael. Like Satan, Samael is identified

96 Hen(hebr) §15 (Synopsis).

97 Cf. BerR 25:1; TJon, Gen 5:24; Hen(hebr) §19 (Synopsis).

98 See Reeg, Satan; further Breytenbach / Day, Satan; cf. also Reeg, Teufel; Riley, Devil.

99 See Scholem, Samael; for further developments in Judaism see Dan, Samael.

100 One exception could be found in SifBam 42, p. 46.

101 ShemR 18:5; EstR 7:12; PesR 47:4.

102 WaR 21:4; cf. also the slightly different version in PesR 45:2.

103 bBB 16a.

104 ShemR 18:5; cf. ShemR 21:7; bSan 89a.

105 BerR 56:4.

106 bSot 10b.

with the angel of death.¹⁰⁷ In the late midrashic compilation *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer* it is written that Samael riding on the snake¹⁰⁸ made Eve pregnant¹⁰⁹ and that he was thrown from heaven to earth where he had sexual intercourse with the daughters of Cain.¹¹⁰

Angels and man

Because angels are not provided with evil inclination and free will they are not the children of God but his servants. In contrast, the ability of man to behave and act ethically, i.e., to do good or evil, makes him the spit and image of his creator. This specific view of the rabbis is well illustrated in a series of various stories describing the rivalry between men and angels.¹¹¹ The idea of superiority of man or Israel over angels is a central point of rabbinic angelology.¹¹² A typical example of this concept could be found in the following text:

“Rabbi Simon said: When the Holy One, blessed be He, wanted to create the first man, the ministering angels were divided in groups and divisions. Some of them said (to God): Let him be created, and some of them said: Let him not be created. For it was stated: *Mercy and truth are met together; justice and peace are at war with one another* (Ps 85:11). Mercy said: Let him be created, for he will do deeds of love. Truth said: Let him not be created, for he will be full of lies. Justice said: Let him be created, for he will show justice. Peace said: Let him not be created, for he will be all quarrel. What did the Holy One, blessed be He, do? He took truth and threw it to the earth. (...) The ministering angels said before the Holy One, blessed be He: Lord of the world, why do you disregard your angel of truth? Let truth rise from the earth. (...) Rabbi Huna Rabba of Sepphoris said: While the angels were disputing and argueing with one another, the Holy One, blessed be He, created the (first man). He said to the (angels): Why are you still disputing? (The first) man is (already) created!”¹¹³

From another point of view the equality of the Israelites and the angels is stressed, like for example in the following passage in *Pirke de-Rabbi Eliezer*:

107 DevR 11:10.

108 PRE 12.

109 PRE 21; cf. TJon, Gen 4:1.

110 PRE 14; 27.

111 See the analysis of almost all relevant texts by Schäfer, *Rivalität* 75-218.

112 See Schäfer's conclusion in: *Rivalität* 232-234.

113 BerR 8:5; cf. the German translation, analysis and discussion of textual problems of this text by Schäfer, *Rivalität* 90-92.

"Rabbi Judah says: As long as a man is wearing the clothes of his splendor he is beautiful in his appearance and in his glory and in his radiance. Thus were the Israelites when they wore that (ineffable) name (of God) – they were as good as ministering angels before the Holy One, blessed be He."¹¹⁴

Obviously, several motifs remind of early Jewish mystical traditions in the so called *Heikhalot* literature. The clothes of splendor, the glory, the radiance, and above all the wearing of the ineffable name of God resemble the angel-like quality of the mystic.

Just another aspect of the relationship between man and angels concerns the theological heart of monotheism: The danger of worshipping angels and of the belief in two divine powers:

"Once a heretic said to Rabbi Idith: It is written: *And unto Moses He said, Come up to the Lord* (Exod 24:1). But surely it should have stated: Come up unto me! – It was Metatron (who said that), he replied, whose name is similar to that of his Master, for it is written: *For my name is in him* (Exod 23:21). But if so, (he retorted,) we should worship him!"¹¹⁵

Though this view is clearly defined as heresy, this text marks the real danger of polytheism inherent in every highly developed system of hierarchic angelology even when made by the rabbis themselves. Already since biblical times worship to angels was defined as idolatry, but, nevertheless, it was done like other kinds of sacrifices listed in the following passage:

"He who slaughters for the sake of the sun, for the sake of the moon, for the sake of the stars, for the sake of the planets, for the sake of Michael, prince of the great host, and for the sake of the small earth-worm – lo, this is deemed to be flesh deriving from the sacrifices of corpses."¹¹⁶

Obviously, prayers to angels were practised by Jews but not allowed by the rabbinic law:¹¹⁷

"If a person faces trouble, he should not cry out to the angels Michael or Gabriel. But he should cry out to me, and I will immediately answer him. In this regard (it says): *All who call upon the name of the Lord shall be delivered* (Joel 2:32)."¹¹⁸

114 PRE 47; cf. Chernus, *Mysticism* 8.

115 bSan 38b (transl. Epstein); cf. Urbach, *Sages* 138-139; Segal, *Powers* 68-73.

116 tHul 2:18.

117 Cf. Bar-Ilan, *Prayers*.

118 yBer 9:1, 13a.

Conclusion

As we could see, angels belonged to the inner circle of *dramatis personae* in rabbinic literature, especially in midrashic stories and exegetical interpretations. In contrast to former concepts in Judaism angels play an active role in the actions of men and God. An angelological system with different classes of angels and certain angels with proper names is established by the rabbis, but it is not consistent and homogeneous. One of the main subjects in rabbinic literature is the relationship between angels and men. The central point of the rabbis is the superiority of man over angels. Another subject concerns the relationship between angels and God. The danger of polytheism and idolatry inherent in the belief in angels is, obviously, a real challenge for the rabbis.

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Abbreviation:

DDD cf. Toorn, K.v.d. etc.

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